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“The Problem With Our Borders in Batken”: Local Understandings of Border Control and Sovereignty in Kyrgyzstan

Steven Parham

When the post-Soviet state of Kyrgyzstan recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary, it was commemorating not just two decades of “standing up and flourishing” in the land where the “dreams of the people came true” under the “flag of liberty,” in the words of the national anthem adopted in 1992.¹ Exhortations in the new Constitution of 2010 to the state’s “unstinting conviction” to “protect state sovereignty and unity of the people” and to “serve for the benefit of the entire society” came amidst rising concern over precisely how much control the state actually has over the fate of Kyrgyz borderlanders in the country’s far-flung South.² In effect, the state was also marking twenty years of the concept of a citizenship tied to a very concrete notion of a national territory in which “rightful belonging” entitled Kyrgyzstanis—often subtly and problematically glossed as “Kyrgyz”—to claim the resources of the state in terms of a bordered identity. With the overwhelming majority of Kyrgyzstan’s more than five million inhabitants residing in the immediate vicinity of newly international borderlines, the ways in which the edges of the state are to be practiced in politically fractured spaces play a vital role in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstani lifeworlds and livelihoods. The Ferghana Valley in Kyrgyzstan’s south is such a region of contestation, made all the more immediate by its tattered borders, its traditional belonging to a larger area (the socio-economy of the Valley itself) than colors on the contemporary map would suggest, and its now century-long history of calling into question distant states’ policies of control.

¹ In the Kyrgyz original, “Örkündöy ber, ösö ber” and “Atkarylyp eldin ümüt, tilegi; Zhelbiredi erkindiktin zhelegi.”

² Quotes taken from, respectively, the Preamble and Article 5 of the unofficial English version of the “Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic” (adopted by referendum on June 27, 2010) translated from Russian by the European Union-UN Development Programme (EU-UNDP) Project on Support to the Constitutional and Parliamentary Reforms and OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, accessed February 7, 2014, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/87546/99880/F1398573553/KGZ87546.pdf>.

The Kyrgyzstani *oblast'* (region) of Batken is the locus of a vibrant socio-political dynamism that is usually cast in terms of interethnic conflict and political instability arising from the complex intermeshing of contested state territoriality, uncertain ethno-political loyalties, and a new economic peripherality. Batken today is a region of Kyrgyzstan only tenuously connected to the state that Kyrgyz claim as their *meken*, their homeland: roads intersect non-Kyrgyzstani territories, water is predominantly used for the agricultural needs of those described locally as non-Kyrgyz, dialects differ from the language used by other Kyrgyz-speakers farther north. However, for the Kyrgyzstani state the territory of Batken *oblast'* has come to symbolize something much larger and more significant than its cartographic isolation suggests. Conflict in this administrative territory (which was carved out from Osh *oblast'* in 1999) plays a role far beyond these impoverished and remote villages: a monument erected in the very heart of Bishkek in 2004 eulogizes the “heroes of Batken” who gave their lives to defend this outpost from what has been termed an incursion by Uzbek militants in the months before the creation of the *oblast'*; and policy commentators in Moscow, Brussels and Washington debate local ethnic distribution and the capacities of the state here to defend its borders along trafficking routes for narcotics originating in Afghanistan and terminating in Russia and the capitals of Europe. “Our borders seem to interest all sorts of people [...]. Maybe they should come and spend some years living along them to see what the problems here are and are not?,” a local historian and teacher exclaimed in Batken in September 2013 after a long conversation on local memories of border-making in the Ferghana Valley.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, all the new Central Asian Republics have been faced with complex socio-political realignments. In this they have been bound politically by the conventional rules of a “nation-state” system that tolerates no territorial inconsistencies in terms of state sovereignty and that is loath to renegotiate lines on maps. Formerly internal boundaries within the Soviet Union, which were in effect borders in only an administrative sense, have become state borders. This has allowed friction between groups that now find themselves on territories claimed by states struggling to assert their legitimacy to be expressed in three arenas: internally, to “their own” titular group as well as vis-à-vis non-titular citizens (frequently, and most controversially, sharing an ethnonym with a neighboring titular state); externally, to similarly new, neighboring titular states; and, on an interna-

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tional stage, to an audience accustomed to regarding the entire region through the twin lenses of contested ethno-political categorization and a decline in geopolitical stability, so often (since 2001) expressed in terms of these post-Soviet states' proximity to Afghanistan. In the case of Kyrgyzstan's territory in the Ferghana Valley, these three arenas come together over the composition of this state's borders, which can be seen as the locus in which conflicts between villagers become weighty matters of state. Important questions arise over how such local conflict has the potential to become a conflict between the states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; and how such conflicts highlight a larger, regional narrative that is of interest to non-regional parties such as the European Union (that provides the Kyrgyzstani state with logistical support and a framework of border management deriving from European contexts) and the Russian Federation (that provides military hardware to the state).³

This contribution shifts our attention away from representations of Kyrgyzstan's borders as being dysfunctional and in need of fixing because their "sub-basic infrastructure" in a region "especially prone to volatility" requires "cross-border collaboration [that] needs to improve considerably given the volatile security situation in the region."⁴ Leaving aside vaguely defined notions of their role in threatening "regional stability," I focus on the interplay of how borders here are discussed and represented by Kyrgyz borderland inhabitants and the Kyrgyzstani state. Such a borderland perspective affords us an appropriate vantage point from which to reflect upon a range of behaviors as well as the parameters of local boundary-making and boundary-reproducing processes because it inflects readily observable inscriptions of the state in locales "where the operation of state power is both naked and hidden from view."⁵ I ask how border control in Batken relates to powerful narratives of threat in this region of Kyrgyzstan where the state has been struggling to assert its control. I address this question by discussing, first,

³ According to the Border Service at the Kyrgyz National Security Committee, Russian support comes in the framework of the "Brothers Fighting for Fixed Borders" program (as quoted by Deidre Tynan, "Central Asia: Russia Taking Steps to Reinforce Security Relationships," *Eurasianet*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64946>).

⁴ See the Introduction section of the Outline of the EU-UNDP Border Management Assistance Programme in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, April 2012, accessed February 7, 2014, <http://www.bomca.eu/en/kyr.html>.

⁵ Mark B. Salter, "The Global Visa Regime and the Political Technologies of the International Self: Borders, Bodies, Biopolitics," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 31, no. 2 (2006): 185.

how state authorities and locals express, contest or argue for the new significance of border control; and, second, in which manner such Afghanistan-driven narratives relate to local lifeworlds in Batken. By using as my sources data generated in long-term and repeated anthropological fieldwork as well as local media reports and publications of donor organizations active in the Ferghana Valley,⁶ I argue that the contentious question of enforcing control over a contested borderline (the “naked” control by the state) contains two dimensions, both of which revolve around a new practice of sovereignty. On the one hand, the state can be seen to pursue a course of centralizing control over Batken by casting local conflict as arising from the lack of sufficient and actually implemented border control, thus connecting border porosity here with the specter of increasing “regional instability” in Afghanistan’s neighborhood. From the perspective of the borderlands themselves, on the other hand, conflict over control of land and water usage, both of which are issues with a long history of contestation, have increasingly come to be expressed in the language of citizenship rather than merely ethnic affiliation, thereby presenting us with an example of “hidden” state control.

Local understandings of border control and state sovereignty in Batken *oblast’* depend on perceptions of the manner in which the Kyrgyzstani state has chosen to inscribe control by the centre onto its periphery; thus, this contribution begins by discussing domestic representations of the status of the state’s actual control over its territory and how this is communicated to the outside world. The role that border control plays in this regard, and the ways in which the state regards outside assistance in this domain, shall be critically examined in light of its impact on local lifeworlds. The second section focuses on how borderlanders in Batken themselves witness the waxing drive for central control over their locales. Here, by following local voices I present ways in which locals attempt to lay claim to bordering processes through their highlighting of historical and contemporary tropes of (dis)connectivity and belonging, and how new manifestations of border control are received and appraised by those most directly exposed to them. I conclude by discussing how borderlanders characterize their position in relation to processes un-

⁶ All quotations from interviews in this contribution were recorded during fieldwork conducted between August and November 2013. A total of twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted (sixteen in Kyrgyzstan’s Batken and Osh *oblast’*s, and five in Tajikistan’s Sughd *oblast’*) in Russian; all translations into English are by the author. Names of interviewees have been altered throughout. The author expresses his especial gratitude to Martyn Aim and Erjan Sydykbekov for support during fieldwork.

leashed by Kyrgyzstani concern over how Afghanistan after the Western military withdraws might affect domestic lifeworlds as well as state sovereignty in Batken.

Inscribing State Control onto Batken

Speaking of the pressures generated by a project of delimiting and demarcating the state's new borders, a Kyrgyzstani ambassador in a speech held at a seminar organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2011 clearly underlined the need for "strong political will" by the state in the face of local opposition to the work of boundary commissions charged with resolving disputes over contested territories, who are often "accused of treachery" by local inhabitants.⁷ The inhabitants leveling such accusations of treachery at the Kyrgyzstani state are invariably borderlanders identifying themselves confidently as Kyrgyz—in other words, local villagers claiming specific territories inhabited by Kyrgyz as inalienable parts of Kyrgyzstan and not being up for territorial renegotiation with a neighboring state regardless of whether Tajiks or Uzbeks live there. As a successor state to the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan inherited strong regionally based patronage networks serving as the basis for the allocation of scarce economic and political resources, and which had been instrumental in developing robust administrative-territorial identities linked to the respective sub-divisions of the Union.⁸ The Soviet Union had taken the process of nation-building very seriously, and the system of titular nations (the Kyrgyz, the Tajiks, etc.) still provides groups in this region with the parameters of the negotiation of political power. As a state, however, this heir to the USSR was not imbued with the resources to implement on-the-ground border control at its new borders: even in the immediate neighborhood of the capital city in the north, along the new Kazakhstani borderline, manifestations of state control at the frontier were not to appear until a decade had passed.

⁷ Erik Asanaliev, Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic in Belarus, speaking at an OSCE Borders Team Seminar in Vilnius, May–June, 2011, <http://www.osce.org/cpc/85263?download=true>.

⁸ Pauline Jones-Luong, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 69–73.

Such a pronounced dearth of symbols relating to the actual implementation of practices of territorial sovereignty has continued to this day to characterize the Kyrgyzstani state at its margins. In the far-flung south of the country, it was not until the “Batken war” of 1999 that central authorities found themselves unable any longer to ignore the issue of national control of “their” territory.⁹ Represented as an infiltration of Kyrgyzstani territory by a large group of Uzbek militants belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, neighboring Uzbekistan began the contentious project of unilaterally laying mines along what it regarded as its borderline with Kyrgyzstan, at that time a line that was largely neither delimited nor demarcated in a mutually acceptable form.¹⁰ A decade later, in another part of southern Kyrgyzstan, the borderline between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was once again in the centre of regional states’ attention when Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks, believing themselves to be persecuted by local (Kyrgyz) authorities in the southern city of Osh, temporarily fled across the border to Uzbekistan’s section of the Fergana Valley. Coinciding with the collapse of central authorities’ power in Bishkek and the ouster of President Bakiev in 2010, the state’s control over its territory was called into question even more fundamentally:

“I cannot answer this question for sure—[whether] we control the territory in the south of my country 100 percent. That’s because of such objective factors as the lingering tension between these two ethnic groups [and] because of the mistrust and lack of confidence of the ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz communities toward local law enforcement bodies.”¹¹

The issue of the relationship between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks on Kyrgyzstan’s territory is explicitly linked to failing control over the periphery by the cen-

⁹ By this time only roughly half of the 971-kilometre-long Kyrgyzstani-Tajikistani and a quarter of the 1,378-kilometre-long Kyrgyzstani-Uzbekistani borders had been officially agreed upon; see Necati Polat, *Boundary Issues in Central Asia* (Ardsey: Transnational Publishers, 2002), 51–59. Today this has remained at a similar level for the Kyrgyzstani-Tajikistani border and risen to nearly three-quarters along the Kyrgyzstani-Uzbekistani border (as reported in “Working groups on delimitation and demarcation of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek state border met in Uzbekistan,” *Kabar*, January 29, 2014, <http://www.kabar.kg/eng/politics/full/9040>).

¹⁰ George Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 108.

¹¹ Arslan Anarbaev, former Interim Head of the Kyrgyz Embassy in Washington, in an interview with *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 6, 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Kyrgyz_Envoy_To_US_Says_Interethnic_Reconciliation_Could_Take_Decades/2120445.html.

tre, in part at least deriving from local suspicions over the state's objectives in mediating between the fraught categories of ethnicity (as expressed in terms of tension between local communities) and the institutions of a centralized Kyrgyzstani state as represented by local law enforcement bodies.

While widely reported bloodshed between these groups was limited to Osh and its immediate environs, farther west in Batken incidents between Kyrgyz and their Uzbek and Tajik neighbors have become seemingly both more frequent and more violent since 2010. Such conflict often arises from the contentious purchase of construction land by non-Kyrgyz or the domination by certain groups (usually ascribed with a non-Kyrgyz ethnic identity but not necessarily non-Kyrgyzstani citizenship) over the few remaining economic lifelines leading out of remote valleys and, invariably, across borderlines even in cases where the ultimate anchor of exchange is itself on Kyrgyzstani territory (such as is the case in direct trade between Batken and Bishkek or Osh). Local media have reported a significant increase since 2010 in incidents that have included, inter alia, reciprocal kidnappings of Kyrgyz and Tajiks or Uzbeks, gun battles between borderlanders and border guards, the destruction of property linked to non-Kyrgyz ownership, and a barrage of accusations of border violations by citizens of Kyrgyzstan crossing into territory claimed by Tajikistan (the Vorukh enclave) or Uzbekistan (the Sokh enclave) and vice versa.¹² What is at stake here is, in the words of the government, "the social and economic development of borderline territories" which has been negatively affected by the "problem of border management and lack of border infrastructure."¹³

A majority of the Soviet Union's successor states have been confronted with an imprecise fit between territorial allocation of political power within units defined by the larger context of the USSR and actual control over bor-

¹² See, for example, Natalia Yefimova-Trilling and David Trilling, "Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan: Disputed Border Heightens Risk of Conflict," *Eurasianet*, August 2, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65744>; Mirlan Alymbekov, "Border conflicts: no alternative to negotiations," *Kabar*, January 27, 2015, <http://kabar.kg/eng/analytics/full/9002>. For an excellent discussion of Sokh border conflict, see Madeleine Reeves, "The Time of the Border: Contingency, Conflict, and Popular Statism at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Boundary," in *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia. Performing Politics*, ed. Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 198–220.

¹³ OSCE, "Speech of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, H.E. Mr. Erlan Abdyldaev on the 20th session of the Council of the Foreign Ministers of the OSCE Member States," December 5, 2013, <http://www.osce.org/mc/109230?download=true>.

derland processes at the edges of those units. Kyrgyzstan, alongside its western and southern neighbors, has however benefited from the exceptional attention accorded to its borders and, by implication, to its weak central control over the movement of people and goods through its periphery by distant states due to its location. In a telling choice of imagery, the Foreign Ministry of Finland, which is a donor country that lacks a historical background to its relations in the region but which has been instrumental in recent years in broaching regional border porosity for the European Union and the OSCE, tersely introduces Central Asia with:

“The geopolitical situation in Central Asia is challenging: drug routes run from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia and Europe, and the unpredictability of the situation in Afghanistan and the neighboring states causes concern about a build-up of extremist Islamic movements in the region.”¹⁴

By emphasizing an imagery of regions that are successively penetrated, this European Union member state correlates the violation of European territory with failures of border control closer to the source of such undesirable new flows. To the European Union and, due to its position in-between, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan (and its neighbors Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) seems to resemble what northern Mexico is to the United States: a drug-infested borderland that fails to stem the flow of narcotics to where those who consume most of these drugs reside. Following the caesura of September 2001, Kyrgyzstan took its commitment to ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan very seriously, going so far as permitting the operation of the first non-Soviet military base on former Soviet territory, which opened at Manas airport near Bishkek in December 2001. Mindful of public perceptions in a state that never rejected its crucial ties of socio-economic exchange with the Russian Federation, a second, Russian military base has similarly been permitted to operate at Kant since October 2003, in the immediate neighborhood of the airbase leased to the U.S. at Manas. The Russian state may well disagree with the military objectives and permissibility of such a base, and yet both of these outside forces share a common concern over the factors alluded to in the citation above. In effect, it is the status of Kyrgyzstani border management that

¹⁴ The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, “Wider Europe Initiative: Finland’s Development Policy Framework Programme,” June 2009, available at <http://formin.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentId=167831&nodeId=15445&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>.

is the focal point for such outside interest, and pressure has been brought to bear upon the Kyrgyzstani state to get its borders “under control” in the interest of “wider regional stability.”

Alerted to global representations of Central Asia as a “first line of defense” in terms of preventing instability in Afghanistan from “spilling over” its borders, the Kyrgyzstani state has not argued against the imagery of global threat clinging to outside characterizations of local state weakness. Instead, such threats have been reformulated to relate to Kyrgyzstani lifeworlds in an immediate manner. Thus, Kyrgyzstani Foreign Minister E. Abdyldaev recently stated:

“Kyrgyzstan is greatly influenced by the Afghan drug trafficking. In the last years drug-expansion has become more aggressive, being the main source of danger to the gene pool, contributing to transnational organized crime, terrorism, and extremism. Porous borders, weak equipment of the respective agencies, lack of human resources, and insufficient anti-drug propaganda affect the fight against illicit drug trafficking.”¹⁵

The connection between internal processes and outside attention (which is, first and foremost, focused on matters pertaining to Afghanistan) has been made explicit in the context of the Ferghana Valley’s contested borders. Thus, state elites suggest that there exists a direct correlation between local conflict in Batken and processes originating from beyond the state’s borders. The combustible mix of new economic peripherality and insistent calls for the pre-eminence of the titular Kyrgyz within the Kyrgyzstani state has coincided with a steady increase in a rhetoric that links border violation from without with (in)stability within. In the words of A. Anarbaev, at the time Head of the Kyrgyzstani Embassy in the United States:

“The interests of [certain] internal destructive forces match the interests of external ones, located in neighboring countries—radical Islamism and drug trafficking. Matching interests unite those groups and may, God forbid, create a new burst of tension in our country. That’s why our government pays a lot of attention to border security.”¹⁶

“Border security” and the juxtaposition of “internal and external destructive forces” are tropes that belong firmly within a language of enclosure that

¹⁵ OSCE, “Speech of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic.”

¹⁶ Arslan Anarbaev, in an interview with *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

characterizes the legitimacy of imposing sovereignty over the entire territory of the state. As a consequence of territorial enclosure, regions formerly at the heart of a larger market space can now become peripheral: deprived of its regionally predicated *raison d'être*, Batken has become an outpost of an eviscerated economy. The new reality of Batken's economic peripherality is highlighted, and its plight reproduced, by what has been described, in a more general context, as states' efforts to curb cross-boundary trade and transfrontier systems of production.¹⁷ Such peripherality is a characteristic consequence of giving precedence to the political aspects of a borderland over and beyond its economic well-being: it stems from a core's political needs and not from considerations of economic opportunity, especially when a boundary divides (from the state's point of view) two political systems and two economic systems that are potentially in conflict with one another.¹⁸

The Kyrgyzstani state claims to identify the solution to local conflict along its southern borders as lying in better implementation of border control. Arguing that "[t]he present and future of a state depends not only on its internal development but also on the nature of that country's contact with the outside world and the ability to secure its interests, including through border security," this state locates a critical threat to national security in "the outflow of the working-age population from the border regions deeper into, as well as out of the country, resulting in land reclamation by inhabitants of neighboring states."¹⁹ By characterizing local conflict over land and water in its remote southern region of Batken as crucially involving territorial violation arising from overly porous borders, the specter of ever increasing regional instability is invoked. Yet, as is evident in such pronouncements by state representatives, the state's desire for increased control over internal movement is intrinsic to the desire to control the borderlands themselves. It is such a desire to "monopolize the means of movement" that lies at the heart of the drive to introduce techniques of identification and thereby unambiguously establish state identities ("citizenships") through documentation such as passports, identity cards, and internal permits (*propuski*).²⁰

¹⁷ Niles Hansen, *The Border Economy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 23–24.

¹⁸ James Anderson and Liam O'Dowd, "Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance," *Regional Studies* 33, no. 7 (1999): 593–604.

¹⁹ Resolution no. 183 passed by the government of Kyrgyzstan, March 6, 2012, accessed February 7, 2014, <http://www.bomca.eu/en/partnership/92-ibm.html>.

²⁰ John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport. Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5–10.

The speedy creation of new borderline infrastructure has not failed to come about because of a lack of societal experience and awareness of the functions of border control: a rarely acknowledged fact in the context of Central Asian border control is that the polity of Kyrgyzstan has a half-century history of actually implementing border control on certain parts of its territory, namely along the former external boundaries of the Soviet Union (to the east with the People's Republic of China, in this case). Practices of border control are widely remembered within societies that experienced a high degree of militarization even in the 1980s. Instead, this has not occurred because of, first, the newly independent state's incapacities in terms of the resources to construct new, state-internal rather than regional, infrastructures and, second, the development of a clear narrative of "neighborliness." Unable independently to muster sufficient resources for such an enterprise and unable to cooperate directly with neighboring states in the contemporary framework of mutual distrust over borders, state elites have found it expedient to turn to outside assistance. This assistance can be seen as a type of resource that the state has generated by pursuing a narrative of great interest to outsiders: proximity to Afghanistan and the perceived threats that that post-Taliban state poses beyond Central Asia's borders. It is suggested that more central control over such remote peripheries is to the advantage of a concerned outside world because it

"[...] enhances national and regional security, promotes global security, creates preconditions favorable to the implementation and development of the individual and society, stimulates the socio-economic and democratic development of the state, enhances the role of law, [and] strengthens mutually beneficial relationships with other countries of the region and the world."²¹

In this formulation, the Kyrgyzstani state represents itself as a responsible member of an international community of states as well as professing its wish to promote "neighborliness." The existence of Kyrgyzstan as a state within such a community entails the *diktat* of sovereign control over territory, embodied by a new infrastructure of border closure – in effect, new regimes of border control. Border control, "the sum of a state's institutions to regulate the movement of people, communication, and goods across external bounda-

²¹ Resolution no. 183 passed by the government of Kyrgyzstan.

ries,”²² represents the most visible manifestation of a state’s narrative of control over its territory by making the state legible to outsiders as well as to citizens, and it figures prominently in the international political system of states that dominates global discourses of foreign policy. The mechanisms and artifacts pertaining to the surveillance of the borderline itself project the parameters of sovereignty from the centre to the periphery through the micropolitics of border control and the powerful class of agents of border control, such as customs officials, border guards, and numerous police forces and state security agencies.²³ The functions that such normative control are meant to have are easily divided into vigilance, monitoring, and restriction. These functions are accomplished through militarization, surveillance techniques, and state-endorsed “gatekeepers” such as border guards and customs officials. Furthermore, such bureaucracies of control serve to “embrace” and keep track of both those who legitimately “belong to the state” (its citizens) as well as those temporarily on state territory.²⁴ It is this convention of border control that Kyrgyzstan has accepted through its emphatic endorsement of the border management concepts developed by the OSCE and the European Union’s Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), thereby embracing a narrative of keeping borders “open yet secure” in order to prevent “terrorism” and the smuggling of contraband.

But what does such assistance mean for the implementation of border control in a locality such as Batken? Forced to consider budget allocations, the state is moving away from the traditional Soviet-era convention of military and para-military border control to “a special, multi-disciplinary [sic.] national system, which operates with wide-ranging powers and capabilities for the integrated protection of the interests of the country at the state border, in the border area, and throughout the regions of the country.”²⁵ In effect, this means the replacement of Kyrgyzstani army units with a professional corps of border troops and “the establishment of functioning civilian control over the activities of border security agencies, the gradual implementation of

²² Andrea Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation. Border Controls in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, 1917–1993* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 19.

²³ However, for a critical distinction between the goals of such control and the power of those actually implementing these goals, see Josiah McC. Heyman, “Putting Power in the Anthropology of Bureaucracy: The Immigration and Naturalization Service at the Mexico-United States Border,” *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 2 (1995): 261–87.

²⁴ Torpey, *Invention of the Passport*, 10.

²⁵ Resolution no. 183 passed by the government of Kyrgyzstan.

operative-mobile methods in border patrol, the full professionalization of the border service (that is giving up enrolling conscripts in the border service).”²⁶ Such “professionalization” visibly goes hand-in-hand with the construction of watchtowers, training centers, and border post amenities; and it is accompanied by the appearance of new vehicles, patrol and sniffer dogs, and new uniforms. Contractors are constructing new border infrastructure (truck inspection units, border outposts, road upgrading as well as new road construction that by-passes pockets of extra-territorial spaces, communication towers, and barracks), and like this the landscapes of Batken’s borderlands are slowly being transformed to resemble physically the outpost of Kyrgyzstan that they have long figured as in representations in far-away Bishkek.

Borderlanders Laying Claim to Batken’s Borders

Confronted with such remodeled border control designed to harden borders here, Kyrgyz borderlanders in Batken choose to emphasize their own participation in boundary-making and boundary-reproduction. By no means merely on-lookers while states have come and gone from the region, borderlanders clearly express their attitudes towards such changes. Local representations of such change here hinge on historical rights as marked on old maps, often by using a vocabulary of entitlement introduced from afar; and borderlanders violate borders when these do not agree with tried and tested forms of interaction with their neighbors. In order to approach the framework within which interaction with the state has taken place from a local perspective, I quote at length the sweep of history that Amir, a local historian in Batken and a former engineer with the Red Army in distant Chernobyl, used to introduce “the problem with our borders in Batken”:

“There was a time when the settled peoples of the Ferghana Valley feared us [Kyrgyz] as great warriors. In those days, all the cities in this region existed only due to the whim of the Kyrgyz: we controlled those who were in power in Qoqand, Khujand, Osh, Andijon. Then, Russia came and they created an office in Tashkent, which was still Kazakh back then. We Kyrgyz and Kazakhs could not read or write back then, but the Uzbeks could, and they used their skills to

²⁶ Outline of the EU-UNDP Border Management Assistance Programme in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

steal much of our land. We were not so clever: we loved our freedom and our sheep and horses. But they learned Russian and drew the very borders we now fight over. Before the Bolshevik Revolution [in 1917] we roamed everywhere and defended our way of life [*byt'*]: this is why there are Kyrgyz in all Central Asia, and also in China and Afghanistan. Today in this region, we are left with just Batken. This is like an island, left over after the sea washed everything else away. Truly, our lands have shrunk!"²⁷

By employing an ethno-political terminology which would have been unrecognizable in the period presented here, memories of connectivity are emphasized alongside the power that directly derived from such connectivity. Such memories of historical control are vivid and dominated by a Kyrgyz point of view that, in the nationalizing language of contemporary post-Soviet Central Asia, is able to draw upon commonly accepted notions of the Kyrgyz geobody,²⁸ that mountainous island "left over after the sea." Tellingly, it is the collusion of neighbors (the "Uzbeks") with outsiders ("Russia") that introduced the territorializing state here by employing a foreign language (Russian), and not the outsiders themselves. From such a perspective, Kyrgyz have been stranded in their lands by historical processes that have now culminated in enclosure.

Disconnecting the Formerly Connected

Distant debates over narratives of enclosure and filtering along "suitable corridors," of the penetration of undesirable goods and individuals from Afghanistan, and of the need to reintegrate Kyrgyzstan into a world that, until 1991, it had clearly been a part of sit uneasily with a people that have a tradition of negotiating regional interaction in the face of a succession of polities claiming their allegiances to an array of political enterprises. Seen from the perspective of Batken, Kyrgyzstan's new territoriality represents a deterioration of local connectivity; "regional cooperation" was a given fact of socio-economic life in the decades prior to independence:

²⁷ As recorded in Batken Town, September 2013. Amir's imagery is closely related to the hagiography of Manas, the epic hero taken to represent the virtues of the "Kyrgyz people" and who conquered Chinese and Turkic peoples alike.

²⁸ For the concept of the geobody, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994).

“Before the end of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and Tajiks would sit and discuss important matters like water and schools and family problems for many hours. Our respective *kolkhoz* cooperated on all these matters. These days we only meet to resolve business questions: what is the current price of potatoes or petrol in Osh [Kyrgyzstan], or Andijon [Uzbekistan], or Isfara [Tajikistan]? Where are the border guards today, and how much money do they demand if encountered? Before independence we all had the freedom to move, but now we have all shrunk in terms of geography and of ambition: we used to know the places personally that we talked about, our mines and mills and refineries worked, and we talked about more important things than potatoes and road blocks.”²⁹

It is the existence of such slowly decaying connectivity that poses the conundrum that Batken finds itself dealing with today and with which a new state rhetoric of territorial boundedness must compete: memories of recent and larger, regional exchange figure more prominently than do official contemporary characterizations of exchange across the new borders of the region. Rural and, in present-day geopolitical terms, remote, livelihoods here have for a long time depended on connectedness within the larger region of the Ferghana Valley. Traditionally, the entire valley successfully cultivated fruit and various cereal crops as well as being a renowned area for horse and cattle breeding. However, during the Soviet period and as a consequence of collectivization in the late 1920s, the valley's abundant water resources were redirected to cotton monoculture and the various food and fodder crops were subsequently heavily marginalized. Cotton production depended on the economic integrity of the entire region due to the vital necessity of the water resources from upstream Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and food for this region was imported from other parts of the Union, most notably from western Siberia. Hence, within the Soviet economy, Batken was intricately linked to wide markets and diverse supply chains. The dissolution of the USSR entailed the hardening of the formerly administrative borders, making the water supply for the cotton fields (predominantly in the Uzbekistani segment of the valley) an international issue, due to Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's dependency on the same water for electricity generation. Today, the market space of the Ferghana Valley, the bread basket of the entire region, is politically (and hence economically) more fragmented than ever before in its ancient agricultural history. More significant for local residents in the three post-Soviet parts of

²⁹ Interview with Amir, September 2013, in Batken Town.

the valley, however, is that infrastructure was similarly designed with one market space in mind, thereby newly affecting the transportation of food and goods, none of which were any longer produced self-sufficiently by any one of these three states.

“Where did these new borders come from? When they were designed in my grandfather’s days nobody could have wanted to mark them with fences, mines or police!”³⁰ For the longest part of their lifetime, the borders of the Ferghana Valley were indeed marked on paper only: there were no customs posts, border zones, or checkpoints on the infrastructure connecting the Republics. Locals in internal borderlands experienced the boundary’s existence due to the existence of the respective Republic’s state institutions (e.g., language use in schools and insignia on local militias’ uniforms) rather than border control mechanisms. While archival information on internal boundaries remains difficult to obtain (and seems to have been marked in contradictory ways on Soviet-era maps),³¹ the internal boundaries most Soviet citizens had to deal with in general were those engendered by the system of collectivization and the subsequent restrictions on freedom of abode rather than ones between Republics. “The boundaries of the *kolkhoz* [collective farm] were far, far more important to us than the borders to the neighboring Republics” is a common statement encountered in Batken when locals talk about their experiences with border control prior to the imposition of the new practices of the territorializing post-Soviet state of the early twenty-first century.³²

The battle against *mestnichestvo* (“localism”), regarded as the antithesis of socialist nationalization policy, was fought in the arenas of internal delimitation (the bordering of *oblast*’s and *raions*) and, most importantly, in the new institution of the *kolkhoz*. *Kolkhoz* were not simply units of production but rather socio-economic communities often bringing together several villages in order to establish the key locus of all in-depth economic development in the under-industrialized, un-urbanized South of the Soviet Union.³³

³⁰ Interview with Dastan, October 2013, in Arka.

³¹ Such maps and contestations over unclear cartographic inclusion of specific territories (and the naming of individual villages in multiple languages) have figured prominently in diplomatic exchanges between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, just as they have in the longstanding but recently resolved disputes between the People’s Republic of China and the Central Asian Republics along their common frontier.

³² Interview with Amir, September 2013, in Batken Town.

³³ Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia. The Creation of Nations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 89–91.

Collectivization, economic modernization, and sovietization all had been part of the drive behind the creation of the *kolkhoz*, and *kolkhoz* served as the most immediate encounter locals in Central Asia had with the state's territorializing strategies, in particular after 1932, when a new passport system created categories of places for which individuals needed special permission to live. This had the effect of tying rural people to their respective *kolkhoz* and as such represented a central strategy in Soviet governing structures.³⁴ When people in Batken today emphasize perceptions of a loss of mobility and, through this, a depreciation of practices of socio-economic exchange, it is the loss of institutionalized patterns of exchange within and between *kolkhoz* "territories" that is inferred. Long experiences here with borders (through the *kolkhoz*) are centrally characterized by regarding them as marking the edge of a local belonging rather than in the enclosing and filtering function they are meant to fulfill for the sovereign states of the Ferghana Valley. It is these edges of local belonging that are now being claimed in the name of the state.

The Margins of Land and Belonging as a Local Resource

The borders that figure so prominently in local lifeworlds in the tripartite Ferghana Valley are here to stay, even despite the observation that these former administrative-only boundaries were never designed to delimit independent and sovereign states. Characterizations by Kyrgyzstani borderlanders of their complexly bordered homeland in Batken overwhelmingly focus on conflict over enfranchisement and belonging rather than contesting the existence of these borderlines themselves:

"This here is Kyrgyz land—Tajiks should not be allowed to build houses on it, and Uzbeks should not be allowed to steal the water that comes from Kyrgyz mountains and flows through Kyrgyz valleys. Tajiks and Uzbeks are neighbors and sometimes guests, and they should stay neighbors and guests rather than pretending to become family by moving in and demanding our things."³⁵

In their interaction with anthropologists, journalists and government representatives, control over land and access to water is expressed in the language of citizenship in the post-Soviet state which, since the time of its inception as one of the ethno-territorial Soviet Republics, has come to be seen as a politi-

³⁴ Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, 64–65.

³⁵ Interview with Orozbek, September 2013, in Batken Town.

cal homeland for a specific titular ethnic “nation.” Building upon an idiosyncratic selection of “national attributes,” by 1936 (the year of the final changes to administrative borders in Central Asia) Soviet ethnographers and administrators believed they had identified territories that would be best suited as “containers” in which the national dialectic would play itself out and to which members of any given nationality would gravitate.³⁶ The socialist homelands thus devised, in theory, were to be ethnically homogenous in an administrative sense: cadre distribution, linguistic education, and control over resources (both in terms of economic extraction as well as symbolic control over these within the framework of the Soviet state) were to be in the hands of the titular group. Because of access to local institutions (such as schooling) and the right to “national particularities” (such as practicing certain socio-economic ways of life), the delimitation of homeland and nation (in effect, the “internal bordering” of the constituent parts of the Soviet Union) mattered greatly to those who found new administrative boundaries on their doorsteps and who, as a consequence, found themselves the objects of new narratives of exclusion and inclusion.

Contestation by locals here of the precise demarcation of territory belonging to one or another state-administered homeland is by no means a novel phenomenon: arguing for the renegotiation of borderlines by employing the language of contemporary normative orders has a long tradition in the Ferghana Valley. By using the terminology of the day, groups who were in the process of understanding themselves to be Kyrgyz or Tajik or Uzbek already petitioned the Soviet state throughout the 1920s and 1930s with the aim of securing certain territories (and with them, certain resources) for themselves. In doing so, “petitioners did not question the official assumption that ‘nationality’ was linked to land and other resources. Instead, the petitioners argued that they were entitled to such resources as a matter of national rights.”³⁷ Archival research has shown that locals actively participated in this process and exhibited considerable skill in molding revolutionary territorial realignments into pre-revolutionary, pre-existing boundaries between

³⁶ Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 115.

³⁷ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 170.

local groups.³⁸ Thus, the delimitation of Ferghana borders was a dynamic process of interaction between local elites and the distant centre in Moscow, even if this process (as we have seen above) has come to be portrayed locally as a collusion of certain groups of locals (“the Uzbeks” in one common such representation) with the distant state.

By and large, the socialist state did not invent the categories to which people were to ascribe themselves, but it did objectify the categories of Kyrgyz-ness, Uzbek-ness, or Tajik-ness as well as tie them to a notion of right-ful, and exclusive, territorial belonging.³⁹ Today’s states in Central Asia have neither contested nor renegotiated these ethno-political identities, but today’s borderlines between these states now apportion not only access to local institutions but also inclusion into mutually antagonistic and economically independent political systems. In an era of narratives that elevate allegiance to the state over locally defined and hybrid belongings—a time in which, most recently, sanctions for violation of territory have actually begun to be implemented—“nationality” as expressed through “citizenship” has remained a resource for borderlanders. Indeed, the increasingly strong language used by the state to argue the legitimacy of enforcing borders in places like Batken has made available a powerful weapon for locals in the fraught conflicts over land and water: by using citizenships to classify “theft” of land, villagers suggest a threat to the state as a whole rather than just conflict between individuals or residents of neighboring localities. In other words, while conflict between Kyrgyz herders over pasture rights should be resolved locally or by the *oblast’* police (who, however, are generally not seen locally as reliable or impartial arbitrators), conflict over water usage (that frequently depends on Soviet-era canals that criss-cross borders) attracts the attention of state security forces, the border police, and international observers alike and can, therefore, in local perceptions be assured to be decided *a priori* in favor of the Kyrgyz party’s interest precisely because higher level authorities are not seen

³⁸ For an analytical discussion of these archives, see Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83; and Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 182–84.

³⁹ For a discussion of such ethno-territorial bordering processes in relation to Kyrgyz groups beyond the borders of the Kyrgyzstani state in China’s Xinjiang Region and Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan *oblast’*, see Steven Parham, “‘Rightful’ versus ‘Real’ Homelands: Changing Concepts of Kyrgyz Boundaries and Belonging on the China-Kyrgyzstan Frontier,” *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 3 (2014): 265–85.

as acting impartially as long as “rightful belonging” is shown to be at stake. Once again, petitioning the state in support of local causes has become a strategy that can yield advantages, and this has become a crucial local resource in a region that in most other respects has had much to lose from the new disconnectivity of the early twenty-first century.

Reappraisals of “New” Border Control

The new regimes of border control that have been taking hold steadily in Batken *oblast*’ in recent years are a clear sign for residents that the state has finally arrived, on the ground and in everyday life. This arrival is taking place in an environment already characterized by strong discourses and traditions of interaction between groups marked by different categories of nationality and citizenship. I have shown how Kyrgyz borderlanders here emphasize “local shrinking,” expressed in terms of the loss of regional-now-international connectivity and “ambition”; simultaneously, more direct avenues of interaction with the Kyrgyzstani state have opened up: relations between certain villages and villagers have become relations between states, and the forces of border control are the vehicles of this contextual shift. Equipped with a newly legitimated language of protection and sovereignty, these forces implement notions of citizenship through, for example, the practice of document checks. Adopting the “professional approach to border management” suggested to the government by foreign advisors and their donors and which forms a vital pillar of both Kyrgyzstan’s international standing as well as providing much needed budgetary relief, the separation of intricately interwoven lifeworlds is rapidly taking place here. A striking feature of new notions of separated territoriality, and a clearly visible instance of the inscription of sovereignty onto local landscapes, has been the construction of new infrastructures to replace Soviet-era arteries that nowadays violate state boundedness. Critically supported by donor money, such new infrastructures that eliminate the need to cross borderlines allow the state to perceive its access to Kyrgyzstani villages as being completely under sovereign control rather than dependent on another state’s regime of border control and, as a consequence thereof, subject to unilateral enclosure by a neighboring state. From the perspective of the newly accessible locales, however, the burgeoning narrative of disconnectivity of recent years is cemented through the *out-*

side support so loudly proclaimed on the ubiquitous information boards adorned with European Union flags.

The “professionalization” of the agents of border control very much has an impact on the ways in which local lifeworlds are changing:

“The old system was for us—the new system is for them. Back then, if we didn’t cooperate with Uzbeks or Tajiks we could be accused of being unpatriotic to the [Soviet] state, of undermining the friendship of the peoples. We were all in this together, back then. Now, if we cooperate one-to-one with them we are accused of being smugglers, of not being vigilant enough about militants coming here. Now, we are traitors to our nation.”⁴⁰

Significantly, border control matters because it matters to borderlanders—the agents of border control can be co-opted, cooperated with, or evaded but they cannot be ignored. In order to live their lives at the state’s margins, the intricate and changing structures of hierarchical command, military control, effective gatekeeper power, and functioning bureaucratic channels and its language of interaction must be learned by locals. The “old” system, in force from the time of independence until the current drive for professionalization, was negotiated between borderlanders and the Kyrgyzstani border forces in the frame of Soviet-era legitimacies with its own specific conventions of interaction. In that environment, “border guards would depend on us for their everyday needs such as cash, food, and sometimes accommodation”⁴¹; salaries were not paid on a regular basis by the state, conscripts were young and inexperienced, and officers knew that basic survival depended on cooperation with locals. Cash was collected for the “crime” of violating an invisible border either through undocumented movement (in which case temporary exemption could be “purchased”) or by using Tajik *somoni* or Uzbek *sum* instead of Kyrgyz *som* (where foreign currency would often in part be “confiscated”). The “new” system, however, is far less reliant on local support: increased scrutiny from outsiders and, concomitantly, the increased reliability of state bodies that are starting to seem like employers suggests that, increasingly, actually enforcing the borderline is to the advantage of border guards. Professionalization, in this regard, entails greater dependencies between such

⁴⁰ Interview with Orozbek, September 2013, in Batken Town.

⁴¹ Interview with Erken, September 2013, on the Kyrgyzstani border with Uzbekistan’s Sokh enclave.

agents and the state; for locals, the effect is most visible in fewer yet dearer “fines” for violation.

The juxtaposition between “us” and “them” points to the subtle shifts in locals’ appreciation of Kyrgyzstan’s new narrative of sovereignty. In casual conversation, locals in Batken are quick to point out their dislike of how borders are nowadays being controlled rather than, as I have argued above, refuting that borders themselves should in principle exist. Whereas conflicts invariably arising over land and water were negotiated between Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks, and border control had been co-opted, now these parties are on less equal footing. Taking a transborder perspective in order to identify the new differentials in interaction between these parties, experiences of non-Kyrgyz “violators” cast light on this new reality:

“He was a young and new border guard and he asked to see my documents. I said I was a Tajik who had been selling melons to Kyrgyz friends here in Arka and that I’d never needed documents before. He told me Tajikistan ended at the southern edge of the road and that I should go and sell them in Tajikistan. He told me I was a trouble-maker—you know, driving up prices, trying to buy property from the profit I make. I said I had a house and family in Gafurov [in Tajikistan] and had been coming here for fifteen years every autumn, and he then accused me of maybe smuggling heroin or proselytizing Islam through my local friends. The bribe I paid wiped out all my profit—that’s the way it is these days I suppose, but why did he have to insult me by thinking I’m an Afghan?”⁴²

The “us” of the old system included Tajik and Uzbek neighbors into negotiation with the Kyrgyzstani state’s authorities; the new system’s “them” is the state and its novel type of control. The spaces in which non-Kyrgyz borderlanders can interact with Kyrgyz have shrunk, and their power to affect Kyrgyzstani border control has all but evaporated. The development of “trade corridors,” a central element in donor-sponsored activity here and designed, one suspects, with the state as a reference point rather than with the borderlands themselves in mind, both disregards the strong networks that already exist between borderlanders and valorizes such exchange as betrayal—in the words of Orozbek as quoted above, “treachery to the nation.” Conflict between Kyrgyz and Tajiks certainly occurs frequently; and increasingly the Kyrgyzstani state is becoming involved by reinterpreting local conflict as a

⁴² Interview with Jahandar, October 2013, in Tajikistan’s Sughd *oblast’* between Arka and Khujand.

matter to be addressed with the Tajikistani state. It is in this way that ethnic boundaries have finally been converted into state boundaries.

Beyond the domain of conflict over land control and water usage, locals show themselves to be uneasy with fresh categories of violation that have been appearing along these borders: accusations of narcotics trafficking, the spreading of new readings of Islam, and cross-border networks of armed and systematic opposition to the legitimacy of the post-Soviet state—a new language of protection has taken hold, using the vocabulary of security, insurgency, and extremism. “Why does the OSCE build new guard posts up on the hills instead of much-needed new houses here in town?” is a legitimate question in the eyes of Batken residents, and an answer that quickly is given often highlights the fact that “such pointless endeavors are allowed because if *we* are all seen to be involved then *they* receive lots of money.”⁴³ Suggesting that the state “sees heroin where there is none, and Taliban where there are none,” and that this takes place because the government in “distant and corrupt” Bishkek gains resources through such discourse, is a common stance in Batken.⁴⁴ Accusing an unstable central government of corruption and self-interest is a damning statement by no means limited to remote Batken *oblast*, and yet here locals have been intimately confronted with Kyrgyzstan’s policies relating to the conflict in Afghanistan. A new generation of border guards serving here and trained in donor-financed facilities is armed with the knowledge that “[t]he Ferghana Valley area is especially prone to volatility, and the high degree of criminality associated with trafficking in drugs, arms and people is a major destabilizing factor mitigating against the rule of law, the development of social capital and increased living standards for the poor.”⁴⁵ Locals muse on who, exactly, the new language of protection is designed to protect.

The ongoing delimitation of borders in the Ferghana Valley is, under such conditions, by no means a simple demarcation of the limit of the state’s affairs and, thus, not at all a matter of little relevance to locals. Once agents of border control begin to actually implement the everyday separation of mutually dependent socio-economic systems by pressing the parameters of exchange into state-sanctioned modes, local interests will suffer:

⁴³ Interview with Orozbek, September 2013, in Batken Town; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Interview with Zhylbek, September 2013, near Nookat.

⁴⁵ Outline of the EU-UNDP Border Management Assistance Programme in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan.

“More borders mean more problems. These problems arise from us no longer knowing how to talk to our neighbors in a common language, or them to us. The conflict we then have makes Bishkek want more security for us. And this means more border control, and more borders than we already have. Of what use are new border markets then? We already have those, don’t we? But they’re illegal, or so they say.”⁴⁶

For borderlanders in Batken it is markets that play a central role. Trade and markets function as lubricants of interaction between different ethnic groups who are nowadays citizens of different countries. These markets thrive off price differentials arising from the “nationalization” of economies. The new enclosures that have been suggested to Kyrgyzstan put the state and its needs at the centre of the state’s attention, as expressed in the (il)legality of certain types of exchange. In this reasoning, border control becomes a function of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy rather than the sovereignty that it desires to deliver to its citizens. Interviewees in the Kyrgyzstani section of the Ferghana Valley are quick to point out that trade takes place *despite* the state, and not because of it or its “new foreign friends.” From such a perspective, the “strong political will” invoked by the state in the context of its desire to clarify its limits through delimitation in order to resolve the dilemma of sovereign control over its territory can only be seen as treachery to the interests of those it purports to “protect”: Kyrgyz in Batken understand very well that their livelihoods are directly interwoven with structures of interaction that by their very nature violate the precepts of “new” border control.

Conclusion: Borders Beyond the Reach of the State

“The problem with our borders here in the Ferghana Valley is that everybody seems to have an interest in having them.”⁴⁷ To be concrete, the spaces at Kyrgyzstan’s edges have become populated by a complex mix of state representatives, delegates of outside concern, alleged agents of subversion of the state, and local borderlanders professing a belonging to mutually exclusive categories of ethnic and national identities, all of whom compete for a stake

⁴⁶ Interview with Rustam (himself originally from Nookat in Osh *oblast’*), November 2013, in Bishkek.

⁴⁷ Interview with Talaybek, September 2013, in Gülchö.

in the permissible parameters of local lifeworlds. The borders that exist here today are “problematic” not because they exist, but rather because their enforcement is seen as crucial to the notion of legitimate sovereignty in a young state. Borderlands, and with them borderlanders, loom large in their importance for the state, far outweighing their socio-geographic peripherality. They are very much seen as an integral part of state territory in all official understandings—to imply otherwise can be seen as calling into question a state’s territoriality and, hence, a challenge to its integrity, its very existence. And yet this is precisely what processes within borderlands, and between borderlands and centers, seem to suggest: while the state may be seen by many as the geographical container of modern society, borderlands refute such assumptions by being, at least in part, larger than such containers.⁴⁸ In places like Batken notions of temporal and political spatialization go far beyond the borders of Kyrgyzstan when regarded through a local lens: borders here are reproduced by using languages of titularity and enfranchisement directly descended from an older order, designed with a different, supra-regional notion of inclusion in mind. In their argumentation today, Kyrgyz borderlanders invoke a Soviet-era, specifically Russian spatialization that outweighs Kyrgyzstan’s “shrunk” spaces in its legitimacy, and this is strikingly underlined by the importance given by today’s antagonists to maps drawn up by Russian emissaries that were originally intended to outline ethnic distribution in the Ferghana Valley but now are taken to denote “historic ownership” of specific territories.⁴⁹

In its search for establishing a similar but contemporary spatial legitimacy, the post-Soviet state has turned to a new narrative that is to be inscribed into borderland locales such as Batken in order to aid “spatial socialization and the territorialization of meaning”⁵⁰ in a Kyrgyzstani context. Whereas in the Soviet period borderlander loyalty was directly wedded to a representa-

⁴⁸ Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” *Journal of World History* 8, no. 2 (1997): 211–42.

⁴⁹ The use of such maps is often mentioned by interviewees in Kyrgyzstan’s borderlands. This practice has also most recently been adopted by state authorities; in early 2013, the Tajikistani foreign ministry requested such maps from the state archives in the Russian Federation (as reported in “Tajikistan Requests Documents On Borders From Russia,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 18, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/tajikistan-requests-documents-borders-russia/24877111.html>).

⁵⁰ Anssi Paasi, “The Changing Discourses on Political Boundaries. Mapping the Backgrounds, Contexts and Contents,” in *B/Ordering Space*, ed. Henk van Houtum, Oliver Kramsch, and Wolfgang Zierhofer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 20.

tion of the margins of the socialist state as being at the forefront of patriotism to a socialist project that understood itself as being an island within an inimical socio-economic environment,⁵¹ today it is the ethno-territorial geobody of “the Kyrgyz” to which citizens are to subscribe. Choosing a narrative of diplomatic interaction which casts itself as part of, rather than aloof from, wider global concern over the dynamics playing out in Afghanistan since 2001, Kyrgyzstan has placed itself firmly within that state’s neighborhood and, thus, directly connected questions of domestic control over its territory with its legitimacy as a state. This is how we can understand a contradiction often pointed out by “the unpatriotic” in Batken: the one form of exchange that today purportedly takes place across these borders, and which could be seen as a form of the “regional cooperation” proposed by international donor bodies, is precisely the one form of exchange that the state must interdict if it is to be part of today’s world order—the trafficking of narcotics, a rare instance of a truly post-Soviet, transnational economic flow. Alongside the other undesirable transnational flow, namely that of a form of Islamic interpretation and teaching frequently glossed as “Wahhabi” or “fundamentalist” in this region, these two processes legitimate the need for the “new” border control discussed above as well as call its practices into question. Neither type of exchange will be permitted by the state to form the content of a new shared economic space in the Ferghana Valley. It is important to note that borderlanders in Batken are by no means equivocal in their opinions in this matter; these types of new flows find no support amongst them. However, local opposition to this type of post-Soviet exchange centers on the lack of resources generated at a local level rather than agreeing with outside condemnation of the qualitative nature of this exchange.

When asked about Afghanistan and their feelings regarding the end of Western involvement there in 2016, locals in Batken are dismissive:

“It’s not our problem but Bishkek’s or Moscow’s problem. We only care about the price of petrol and fruit here. We don’t care for the Taliban and they don’t care for us. There aren’t any here, there never have been any here, and if they come after 2016 it will be to make war on [President] Karimov [of Uzbekistan] and not on us or on Bishkek.”⁵²

⁵¹ Chandler, *Institutions of Isolation*, 24–28.

⁵² Interview with Aynur, September 2013, in Osh.

In the Soviet period, the connection between the inhabitants of the Ferghana Valley and Afghanistan clearly derived specifically from the Soviet promotion of ethnic transfrontier ties between titular groups in Central Asia and their “national brethren” in northern Afghanistan in the 1980s, which were argued at this time to correspond to one another in the framework of socialist nationality policy.⁵³ And such ties were directed southwards, with the Soviet Republics serving as models within this system. As a consequence, an imagery of invasion predominates in the minds of the many individuals in Kyrgyzstan, the so-called *Afgantsy*, who participated in the Soviet war effort there between 1979 and 1988 as soldiers, engineers, and drivers. Importantly, what was being taken to the south and subsequently brought back home again was, among other things, the knowledge that the state was powerful. Now this has been turned on its head: whereas before locals were actively involved in such types of (Soviet) state activity, today a passivity is felt to predominate in the manner in which the (Kyrgyzstani) state seems to subject itself to its geopolitical environment. In this vein, in contemporary Kyrgyzstan it is not the dwindled ethnic Kyrgyz minority of Afghanistan’s Badakhshan region that figures in Kyrgyzstani representations of Afghanistan and how that troubled state relates to the Ferghana Valley. Far more, in the language of the day it is the image of an Afghanization of the region in the sense of local insurgency financed by illicit trade networks and legitimated in the name of impermissible interpretations of religion that holds ascendancy. Seemingly at the mercy of a new type of global flow, the inscription of the state onto local landscapes embodies the *powerlessness* of the state. Today it is borderlanders themselves and their lifeworlds who are now “a problem to be dealt with” in the interest of the wider world.

A “border-less” world may well be developing for the new, highly mobile transnational elites of the Western world, where border crossing has become a formality and, within the European Schengen space, in effect an invisible process for the vast majority of crossers. Yet the Central Asian Republics have experienced the reverse of this development: for decades, crossing the internal boundaries of the Soviet Union (i.e., those lines that today represent formal state borders) was more a matter of internal travel documents related to the Soviet system as a whole. Today, however, the region

⁵³ Joseph Newman, Jr., “The Future of Northern Afghanistan,” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 7 (1988): 732–34.

has become politically territorialized: goods need export/import documents, individuals might need permits and visas, and mutually exclusive citizenships have been created that superimpose a new nationality over ethnic identity. Thus, Central Asia has become less inter-connected over the past two decades, and borders have impacted local lives in ways never imagined before in the region. In this sense, “inter-connection” across borders today is shifting to signify the interaction of states with each other while borderland-to-borderland interaction is in steady decline. This is the arena in which the dynamics of post-2016 border-making and border reproduction are unfolding.